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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000812

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PROMINENT BEIRUT CHRISTIAN TALKS
POLITICS IN HIS COMMUNITY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Massaoud Ashqar, widely regarded as one of the best known Christian figures in Beirut, discussed with Poloff political trends and concerns of the Lebanese Christian population. He described Michel Aoun as the most popular Christian leader in Lebanon despite Aoun's unpalatable alliance with Hizballah. Ashqar, a Kataib regional commander during the Lebanese civil war, strongly opposes Lebanese Forces (LF) Commander Samir Geagea and, along with some LF veterans, has formed a political party to provide an alternative. Ashqar briefly discussed the current security situation, describing the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as "institution number one" in Lebanon. End Summary.

EXPLAINING AOUN'S SUPPORT

¶2. (C) Poloff on May 24 met with Massaoud Ashqar, a popular opposition politician from the Christian Ashrafieh area of Beirut. Describing the Christian sect's viewpoint on politics and leadership, Ashqar claimed the majority of Christians are politically "neutral" -- they oppose both the March 14 Coalition and Hizballah. General Michel Aoun, however, is the most representative Christian leader, according to Ashqar. Although Aoun "lost" 10 to 15 percent of his supporters by aligning with Hizballah, he would regain their votes in any election because all other Christian options are unpalatable. Ashqar assessed that in 2005 Aoun's support was 70 percent of the Christian population; only 30 or 35 percent came from real Aoun supporters, the rest was from Christians who did not like the alternatives. Ashqar pointed to this year's engineering syndicate vote as further evidence of Aoun's continued support despite the alliance with Hizballah: Aoun's Christian candidates won the engineering syndicate vote but the independent Shia engineer defeated Hizballah's candidate. This suggests, according to Ashqar, that the majority of Christians voted with Aoun but the Shia did not back Hizballah.

GEAGEA NOT AN OPTION

¶3. (C) Discussing other Christian leaders, Ashqar, a Kataib regional commander under Bashir Gemayel, described Samir Geagea as an "extremist." Ashqar said there was, and still is, "no democracy" in the Lebanese Forces (LF) under Geagea.

He said Geagea's unwillingness to compromise in the current political environment is unhelpful to the future of the country. Ashqar also repeated the oft-used Christian opposition accusation that Geagea sold the Christian community to the Sunnis when he allied with Sunni leader Saad Hariri.

FREEDOM PARTY

¶4. (C) Ashqar was hesitant to discuss the political party that LF veterans formed to oppose Geagea, but he provided polloff general details about the group, called "Freedom" in Arabic. According to Ashqar -- a leading member of the party -- the Freedom group proposes a "real partnership" in Lebanon. They support a new electoral law with smaller, more representative, districts. (COMMENT: Ashqar judges the Syrian-imposed election law as the reason why he has not won election to the Lebanese parliament. The "Ghazi Kenaan" electoral law groups Beirut's Christian area, Ashrafieh, with two predominantly Sunni neighborhoods, allowing the Hariri slate -- which won in the other two districts -- to sweep the Beirut district in 2005. End Comment.) Although Ashqar describes the Aoun-Hizballah Memorandum of Understanding as a "good paper" because it represents dialogue between sects, he calls Hizballah's weapons "a problem" and claims the state should control all arms. Freedom supports a solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon; Ashqar argues that the Lebanese Government, not the Arab League, should have jurisdiction over the camps.

LAF AND NAHR EL-BARID

¶5. (C) Discussing the country's security situation, Ashqar

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described the LAF as the "institution number one" in Lebanon.

It is the only guarantor of a free Lebanon and the coexistence of Lebanese. Ashqar claims there is no danger that the current standoff between the LAF and Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr el-Barid Palestinian camp will fracture the LAF. Because the Lebanese population sees Fatah al-Islam as an external faction, the fight against the group will not increase tensions among sects in the LAF.

FELTMAN